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SUBJECT: SLOVAKIA H1N1 UPDATE: 29 NEW CASES IN PAST WEEK, 1 DEATH

REF: BRATISLAVA 471

11. (U) The Slovak Health Ministry released its latest figures on November 9, showing 29 new cases of H1N1 flu diagnosed in the previous week, bringing the total number of cases in Slovakia to 200 since the spring. A 48 year-old woman became the first person with a confirmed H1N1 infection to die in Slovakia, although the Health Ministry was quick to add that her death was caused by heart failure. Most of the new cases were concentrated in Bratislava, on the opposite side of the country from the border with Ukraine, which is currently experiencing a serious outbreak. The Slovak government has now closed all but one of its road border crossings with Ukraine, although both rail crossings remain open. Medical personnel have been stationed at each of the border checkpoints to examine those seeking to enter the country, and they have been authorized to deny admission to anyone with flu symptoms.

12. (SBU) As reported reftel, the Slovak government has been playing down the danger posed by the potential of a wider H1N1 outbreak. Health Minister Richard Rasi has repeatedly asserted that the government is well-prepared for any eventuality, stressing the availability of face masks and hospital beds. It is notable, however, that Rasi has given the media only vague--and possibly misleading--information about the availability of H1N1 vaccines. He has told reporters only that the flu vaccines will be purchased and delivered to Slovakia "soon," adding that there is plenty of time to inoculate the population before the H1N1 outbreak will peak in late January. WHO Country Director Darina Sedlakova (protect) told us last Friday that the contract will be signed at the end of November and vaccines likely will not be delivered until late January. She added that she expects the H1N1 outbreak to peak well before that time, which is typically the peak of seasonal flu. One newspaper reported on the basis of Rasi's remarks that the vaccine will be delivered by early December; we have not yet seen any effort by the Health Ministry to correct this report. In the meantime, some Slovaks are reportedly traveling across the border to Hungary to purchase H1N1 vaccines.

13. (SBU) COMMENT: Although Rasi's evasive answers to questions about vaccine availability are troubling, we have no reason to believe that the Health Ministry is otherwise releasing inaccurate information. Sedlakova told us that she has confidence in the government's flu statistics, which still show a fairly low rate of infection.

EDDINS